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ABSTRACT

This booklet contains the text of a speech given by the founder of the Children's Defense Fund during Stand for Children Day at the Lincoln Memorial on June 1, 1996. The speech asserts that Stand for Children Day is about unity and community rather than controversy, and is about rekindling children's hope and renewing citizens' faith in each other and in the nation's future. It states that children require a seamless web of family, community, employer, and government support; strong family and moral values; private charity and public justice; good home training, good school training, good job training, and good moral training; and parents and leaders who struggle to practice what they preach. The speech encourages listeners to return home and do at least one thing for one child, and concludes that a nation that does not stand up for its children does not stand for anything and will not stand strong in the twenty-first century. (EV)

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AMERICA CAN STAND UP FOR CHILDREN!

SPEECH BY

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

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We stand today at the Lincoln Memorial as American families and as an American community to commit ourselves to putting our children first, to building a just America that leaves no child behind, and to ensuring all our children healthy and safe passage to adulthood.

We stand as parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, older siblings, neighbors, professionals and laborers, educators and students, religious, business, community, and political leaders. And we stand to affirm our belief that each of us individually and collectively as citizens of a great nation can do better in protecting and improving the quality of life for all children.

We stand together as an American people—Red, White, Brown, Black, and Yellow; young and old; rich, middle class, and poor; female and male; physically and mentally challenged; Jew and Gentile; Christian and Moslem; Hindu, Buddhist, and Baha'i; believers and non-believers; Republicans, Democrats, Independents, liberals, moderates, and conservatives—each an inextricable part of the amazing sacred mosaic of God's universe and of America's democracy. We come from every state and from over 3,700 sponsoring organizations representing tens of millions of Americans.

We have come here with many concerns and by many means for our children. Some of us walked and some came by wheelchair. Some came by rail, air, and bus. Some came alone and some in groups. Some came with family and some have no family. Some of us have one or more homes to protect our children from the cold, heat, and storms of life. Some of us have no home or place to call our own. No one has been excluded.

Some of us are working so hard at two or three jobs to make ends meet we spend little or no time with our children. And some of us are so desperate for one decent job and child care, we do not enjoy the time we do have with our children. Some of our children have access to the best health care in the world, and some of us live in fear every day that our children will get sick and be unable to see a doctor because we have no health care. Some of our children are tracked for Princeton and Yale, and some of our children are tracked for prison and jail for

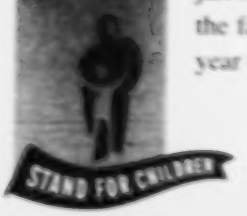
about the same cost but with vastly different dividends for them and for America.

While we do not agree on everything, we do agree on one crucial thing: that no one in America should harm children and that every one of us can do more to ensure our children grow up safe, healthy, and educated in nurturing families and in caring communities. Children depend on many adults—their families first and foremost, but also their neighbors, teachers, religious, and community leaders—to guide their way and support them on their journey to success and adulthood. That's why we stand with our children and families today.

This day is about unity and community, not about controversy. It is about rekindling our children's hope and renewing our faith in each other and in our nation's future. It is about America's ideals, not about any single group's ideology. It is about what we *can do* and *are doing* to make a difference for our children, and not about what we can't do. It is about principles of justice and compassion and not about personal or partisan politics. It celebrates our youth, family, and community strengths rather than problems and seeks to turn our pain into the power of our collective healing—into a movement to leave no child behind.

Together we *can* give our children back their childhoods, safety, and hope and improve millions of young lives *right now*. While we don't know yet how the brain works or have a cure for AIDS, we do know how to prevent and treat many childhood diseases and provide quality health care, child care, parent education, and recreation. We just need to do more of what we know works for all our children like every other wealthy industrialized nation.

We do not stand here advocating big government; we advocate *just* government—government that does not give more to those who have and less to those who have not. We advocate *cost-effective* government that invests more to prevent than to punish our children's problems. We believe that jobs rather than jail should be the rite of passage to adulthood. And we question the family values of a nation that is willing to spend $20,000 a year to lock our children up but is unwilling to invest $3,500 to



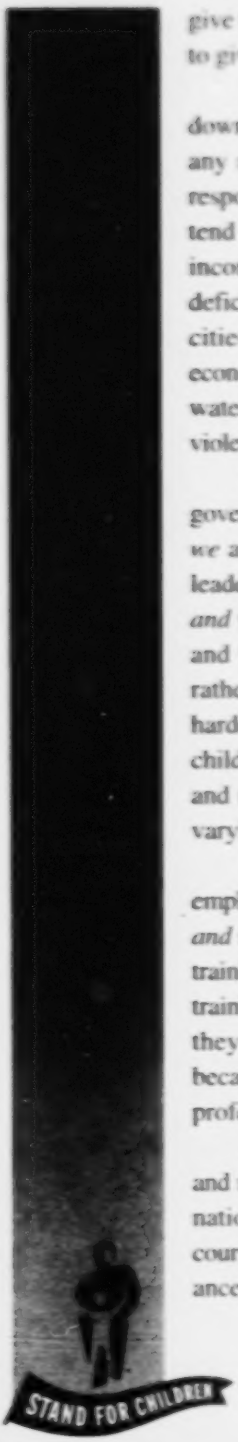
give them a quality Head Start or $1,500 worth of prenatal care to give them a Healthy Start in life.

We do not believe government is *the* answer to the breakdown of family, community, and moral values all over America any more than we believe hungry and homeless children are responsible for all America's ills as some political leaders contend to justify destroying our children's health, nutrition, and income safety nets. Children did not cause America's budget deficit, labor market wage stagnation, deindustrialization of our cities, and exportation of parental jobs abroad in our global economy. Children are not responsible for the pollution of our air, water, earth, airwaves, and moral values and the pervasive gun violence that kills a child every hour and a half and threatens us all.

We stand today from across the nation because we know government is only a part of the answer and because we know *we* are the answer—individuals, families, community, religious leaders, and citizens who hold ourselves personally accountable *and* who hold our leaders publicly accountable with our voices and votes. As active citizens, we *can* make our leaders help rather than hinder our children and make it easier rather than harder for families to raise healthy, safe, educated, and moral children. We *can* and must end the simplistic either/or political and media labels that get in the way of meeting complex and varying child and family needs.

Children require a seamless web of family, community, employer, *and* government support. *All* children need strong family *and* social values; private charity *and* public justice; good home training, good school training, good job training, *and* good moral training; and parents *and* leaders who struggle to practice what they preach. So many of our children are morally confused because so many adults talk right and do wrong in our private, professional, and public lives.

Just as President Lincoln's memorial is undergoing repair and renovation from the ravages of wear, weather, and time, our nation's spiritual, economic, and social values and public discourse need repair from the ravages of resurging racism, intolerance, violence, and extremism. We have seen our national house



of law exploded in Oklahoma City and God's houses of worship torched in Alabama and Tennessee. We hear voices of division dishonoring the sacrifices of Gettysburg, Birmingham, and Mississippi and of Lincoln and King who lived and died for "one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." We will stand up to those who try to divide America into two houses: one for "them" and one for "us." We will stand strong for one national house big enough and fair enough for the privileged and powerful, the struggling middle class, *and* the poor and powerless. We stand for one strong national safety net for our young, old, disabled, and sick during recession, disaster, and joblessness *wherever* they live.

We stand for a nation in which the poorest baby born in the Mississippi Delta, Montana plains, Texas barrios, Arizona reservations, and inner-city ghettos has the same God-given and America-promised birthright of fair opportunity, respect, and protection as the middle-class child born in the suburbs of Shaker Heights, and as the most privileged child born on Park Avenue. Each and every American child adds or subtracts, multiplies or divides America's problems and potential; fulfills our nightmares or our dreams.

President Lincoln warned that "a house divided against itself cannot stand." That's why we remember his words and are acting to renovate our divided and battered national house to make sure it has room and justice enough for all. When Jesus Christ invited little children to come unto him, He did not invite only rich, middle class, male, White, children without mental or physical challenges, from two-parent families, or our own children to come. He invited *all* children to come as do all the great faiths represented here today to renew America's and God's sacred covenant with every child.

Our cup of pain overfloweth with the needless suffering and deaths of our children. Patricia Kachinsky from Clarkston, Mich., said: "My 7-year-old daughter died of AIDS in my arms. That's when I knew I had to Stand for Children. For Mother's Day, all my other children gave me the gift of a plane ticket to

fly to Washington, D.C., and be there for all the children of America, like my foster daughter, who just wasn't here long enough. She had spent the first years of her life terrified of rats in her bathroom and guns in her streets. I'm coming to Stand for Children because no child should have to live like that."

No child *should* have to live like that in the richest, most powerful nation on earth—the standard-bearer of democratic values in a spiritually confused, Balkanized, and violent world desperately hungering for moral leadership.

Our cup of endurance runneth over in the world's richest nation with a gross national product of $7.3 trillion that lets over 2,600 children be born into poverty every day (most of whom are White and live in working families) and lets children be the poorest group of Americans. We challenge those who claim we have more will than wallet. We have the biggest wallet in the industrialized world but a far smaller will to share it with our children. Is America so afflicted by a poverty of riches and such a paucity of morality that we are unwilling to strike a better balance between the desires of the few at the top who have so much with the needs of the many in the middle and of our children at the bottom who do not have enough?

Our cup of fairness is exhausted by those who say we cannot afford to provide our children health care and child care and their parents a living wage; that we are too poor for each American to invest another penny a day to ensure every American mother prenatal care and another nickel a day to provide health care to our 10 million uninsured children. Yet they do not say we are too poor to give tens of billions of dollars in new tax breaks for the non-needy and nearly $7 billion to the Pentagon for weapons they didn't even request in this post–Cold War era.

Our cup of shame and outrage runneth over with the killing of a classroomful of children by guns every two days. The over 220 million guns in our homes, on the streets, in the hands of our children who kill themselves and each other, and in the hands of those who kill our children, threaten every one of us everywhere. A teacher is shot in a Los Angeles school library as

two gangs square off. The Menendez parents are shot to death in their mansion by their sons. A gifted college student at Johns Hopkins is killed by another student. The victim's shocked mother asked, "Why in the world did his executioner have a gun?" How do we answer her or the 5,751 children who lost their lives in 1993 to remorseless bullets in the world's leading military power? How do we atone for the 60,000 American children who have suffered a higher gun casualty rate since 1979 than our soldier battlefield deaths in Vietnam, the Gulf, Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia combined? What has happened to us that the killing of children has become routine and is increasing—94 percent over the past decade? Is the world's strongest power so weak in might and right that we cannot and will not provide our young safe communities where they can play and grow to adulthood without fear?

Our cup of patience has been consumed by those who say it's not the right time to invest in children—by can't-do leaders driven more by polls than by principle; more by short-term partisan politics rather than by long-term national progress; and more by ideology and special interests rather than by child, family, and national interests. We say to them today—Republicans, Democrats, liberals, moderates, and conservatives alike in our state, city, county houses, White House, and Congress—that our children's lives are not for political sale, bickering, or gridlock. We no longer will take "can't do" or "no" for an answer to meeting our children's needs. So many children could gain a lot in the short run, and our nation could save a lot in the long run, if each of us was willing to share a little and tell our leaders to make better choices. We *have* better choices to make in America. The question is whether we have the common and moral sense to make them and get off the road towards national suicide.

It is always the right time to do right for our children being born and formed in mind, body, and spirit every minute as life goes on or stops. In the six hours since 9 a.m. when we began Stand for Children Day, one American child has died from child abuse and neglect, four have died from gunshots, and

seven have died from poverty. Twenty-three infants have died before their first birthday, and 400 have decided to drop out of school. America *can* do better. The can-do America which wrested independence from the British, sent the first human to the moon, stopped Hitler's and Mussolini's war on human decency, *can* stop child suffering and death and save our children, families, and communities. A nation that does not stand up for its children does not stand for anything and will not stand strong in the twenty-first century.

So young people, families, child advocates, citizens, and all who came to stand for children today, return home and keep standing together for children every day until all America stands with us. Go home and take *at least one* of the steps in the citizen action guide we are distributing today for just one child and you will make a difference. Go home confident that you do not stand alone: we stand with you. Let's just keep doing our *very* best for children and leave our seeds of service to God who will make of them towering oak trees of hope in whose shade our children can play and laugh and live and grow again all over America.

Go home trusting God's love and good for our children and America. He lifted up Abraham Lincoln—a poor rural Kentucky boy—to the presidency of the United States to save our union from slavery and sectionalism. God used a courageous slave woman named Harriet Tubman to lead slaves to freedom on an underground railroad just as He can use you to heal our communities. Harriet Tubman boasted she never lost a passenger—a record neither Amtrak nor any American airline can match. Persevere and keep seeking to do God's will and work. "'Twa'n't me, 'twas the Lord," Harriet Tubman said. "I always told Him, I trust you. I don't know where to go and what to do, but I expect you to lead me." And He always did and He always will!

Don't trust politicians or the media to lead you. Trust God to lead you. Don't look to money or fame to make you secure. Look to God to secure you. Don't trust gangs or guns or drugs to protect you. Trust God to protect you.

Let me end with a prayer.

O God, forgive our rich nation where small babies die of cold quite legally.

O God, forgive our rich nation where small children suffer from hunger quite legally.

O God, forgive our rich nation where toddlers and school children die from guns sold quite legally.

O God, forgive our rich nation that lets children be the poorest group of citizens quite legally.

O God, forgive our rich nation that lets the rich continue to get more at the expense of the poor quite legally.

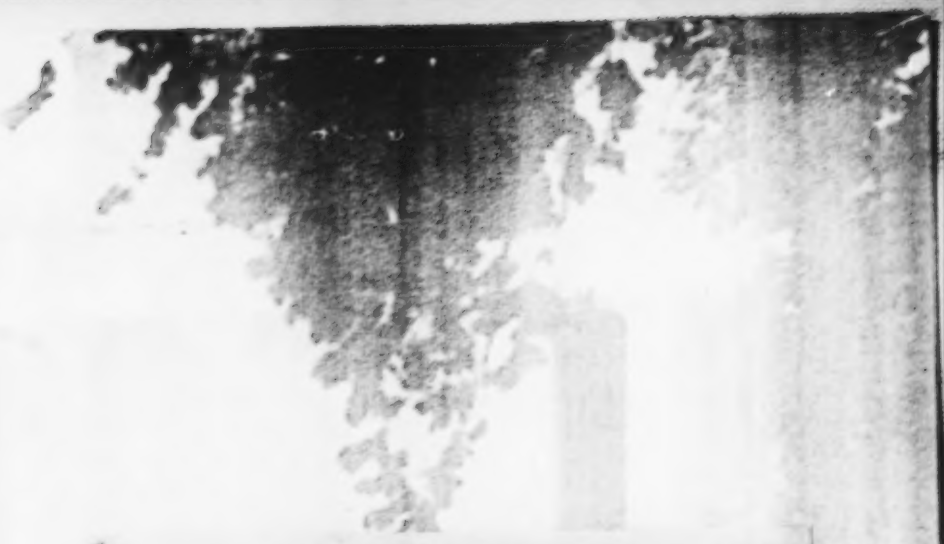
O God, forgive our rich nation which thinks security rests in missiles rather than in mothers, and in bombs rather than in babies.

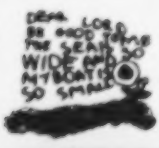
O God, forgive our rich nation for not giving You sufficient thanks by giving to others their daily bread.

O God, help us never to confuse what is quite legal with what is just and right in Your sight.

Everything that Hitler did in Nazi Germany was legal. But it was not just and right. For decades slavery and racial segregation were legal, but they were not just and right. Let us stand up until America does what is just and right for every child.

As we end this precious moment together to continue standing for children, one human being touching another, again and again, a thousand, million, and many millions of times—whoever you are, wherever you are anywhere in America—stand up and commit to leave no child behind. If you cannot stand, raise your hands. If you cannot raise your hands then lift your eyes or open your ears and hearts to every child in America. If you do, our children and great nation will do God proud when He comes.





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